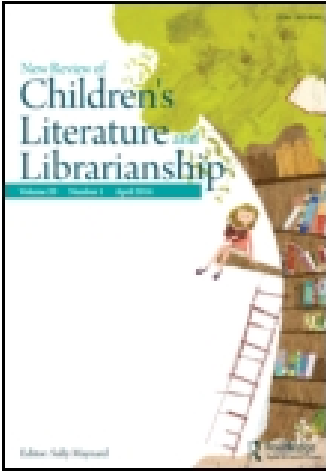


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### "Poetry is a Tremendous Ally": Children's Poet Michael Rosen on Teachers' Attitudes Toward Poetry

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## **“Poetry is a Tremendous Ally”: Children’s Poet Michael Rosen on Teachers’ Attitudes Toward Poetry**

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*Revolving around an interview with the contemporary children’s poet Michael Rosen, this article examines some of the potential effects of teachers’ attitudes toward poetry. The interview explores Rosen’s views on teachers’ attitudes toward poetry and the implications of such attitudes on students’ engagement with poetry. This article argues that teachers need to act as role models by positioning themselves as readers of poetry in order for students to perceive such reading as an enjoyable activity.*

*KEYWORDS* poetry, teachers’ attitudes, reading, teachers’ positioning, student engagement

### INTRODUCTION

The former Children’s Laureate Michael Rosen is perhaps one of the most outspoken defenders of poetry’s role in education. In addition to being a prolific poet, Rosen is actively involved in training teachers how to teach and write poetry. As attested by Lambirth (2006, 46), the “objective” of Rosen’s work with teachers is “the enrichment of the teaching of poetry in our classrooms.” His residencies and workshops at schools all over the UK inspire thousands of children to engage in the reading and writing of poetry. Moreover, they spur teachers to see poetry as something that is not just meant to be taught for examination purposes but which can also be enjoyed both inside and outside the classroom.

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This article is based on an interview I conducted with Rosen in March 2013, in which I asked him about his views in relation to teachers' attitudes toward poetry. The interview took its cue from the proposition that teachers' attitudes toward poetry can influence students' engagement with the genre. If teachers approach poetry only as something to be tackled in class in preparation for an examination it is possible that students will emulate them and shy away from reading and enjoying poetry in their everyday lives. Furthermore, if teachers fail to position themselves as readers of poetry it is unlikely that they will kindle much enthusiasm for poetry in students. Rosen firmly believes that if teachers adopt a positive attitude toward the teaching and reading of poetry it can act as an "ally" to them in their efforts to develop students' literacy skills and creativity. This article seeks to explore these issues by capitalizing on the thoughts of one of the UK's foremost contemporary poets.

### A SOURCE OF APPREHENSION

In the interview Rosen claimed that some teachers feel "nervous" in relation to poetry because of their past experiences as students at school. According to former Poet Laureate Andrew Motion (as cited in Gibbons 2000) teachers need to be provided with the opportunity to "discuss how to get over the mental block that poetry was difficult to teach and somehow irrelevant." Teachers need to join forces with poets-in-schools in the drive to "demystify poetry" (Motion as cited in Gibbons 2000). This is significant because out of all the different text types that teachers are expected to teach, "poetry is the one which seems to present the most people with the most challenges" (Dymoke 2009, 71). Motion (as cited in Shepherd, 2010) is concerned with the possibility that teachers are partly responsible for alienating students from poetry: "The appetite for poetry is fundamental to us as human beings. What on earth have we done, producing an education system in this country which allows the majority of people, by the time they hit puberty, to think otherwise?" Teachers' fear of poetry might have an effect on students' engagement with the genre and it could lead them to shrink away from it once they stop studying it at school.

Rosen also referred to the reverence with which some teachers treat poetry. Their attitude might help to make poetry appear less accessible for students and might bolster the misconception that it is one of the most challenging genres to tackle in class. This reverence is present in a number of works on poetry's place in education (Holbrook 1961; Hughes 1967; Mole 1973), works that all seem to see a potential for spirituality in poetry. In fact, Skelton (1978) asserts that "Certainly poetry does imply attitudes which can be described as religious" (126). Dymoke (2003) considers it "interesting to note how schools are able to promote pupils' spiritual, moral, social,

and cultural development through their teaching of literature, and poetry in particular” (178). However, if poetry has “become a more socially acceptable alternative to scripture,” Dymoke (2003) contemplates whether this will “also cause some teachers to shy away from fully engaging with the genre” (179). By treating poetry as if it were sacred, teachers might unwittingly risk alienating students from it.

## TEACHERS AS READERS

In the interview, Rosen indicated that very few teachers read poetry for pleasure. A number of studies highlight the importance of teachers’ positioning themselves as readers as a means of encouraging students to engage in extensive reading. According to Day and Bamford (1998) “Keeping in mind that they are role models may change teachers’ perceptions of the classroom and their role as teachers” (136) Teachers who position themselves as readers engage in classroom practices that enable them to “guide students and participate with them as members of a reading community” (Day and Bamford 1998, 47). Such practices boost students’ motivation to engage in extensive reading and allow them to see reading as a pleasurable activity because of their perception of teachers as role models. For Day and Bamford (2002) “Effective extensive reading teachers are themselves readers, teaching *by example* the attitudes and behaviors of a reader” (140). They are teachers who are willing to “talk with students about their reading lives” (Commeyras et al. 2003, 164) and consider it important to inspire a love of reading by acting as readers who teach.

Teachers need to embrace the idea that they themselves play a crucial part in helping students to become enthusiastic readers. According to Hedgcock and Ferris (2009): “An obvious but often neglected way to do this is to model the behaviors of an enthusiastic reader” (227). The problem of reluctant young readers is compounded by the fact that in some cases the teachers themselves are not keen on reading, especially when it comes to poetry. This is partly due to the fact that “some teachers associate poetry solely with school preparation rather than with relaxation” (Dymoke 2009, 82). A study by Cremin et al. (2009, 204) conducted in the UK found that 73.2% of teachers had read for pleasure during the last month. However, less than 2% opt to read poetry (Cremin et al. 2009, 205). The same study found that 58% of teachers could name only one or two poets, with 22% being unable to name any poets at all (Cremin et al. 2009, 207). Such facts lead Motion (as cited in Shepherd, 2010) to declare that “We need to better equip teachers to engage with a range of poetry – wider than is presently on offer.” Children’s poet John Rice (as cited in Xerri 2012, 114) confirms this view by indicating that he is disheartened with teachers’ knowledge and reading of poetry:

I don't think they do read it as much as we suppose they do because sometimes if I mention a poet's name to a teacher they don't know who that person is and if I mention certain poems or certain anthologies it's a very restricted canon of work that teachers have read and it's usually poetry from very deep in the past.

The significance of teachers' positioning as readers of poetry as a means of encouraging young readers is highlighted by the results of a study that aimed to develop 43 teachers' stance as readers who teach (Cremin 2010). The results demonstrate that "teachers' increased knowledge, pleasure and use of poetry widened the children's repertoires and experience of poetry, positively influencing their understanding and attitudes" (Cremin 2010, 223). This implies that when teachers position themselves as poetry readers, they stand a better chance of positively influencing students' attitudes toward poetry, enabling them to read it for pleasure and not just for study purposes.

#### THE INTERVIEW

Interviewer: You meet many teachers in schools and other places. What sort of attitude do they have towards poetry?

Rosen: Very mixed. Some people are nervous of it I think because of their experience of poetry in school. I caricature it by saying that a lot of poetry teaching leaves people with a sense of a series of mild humiliations. There was a poem, there was a teacher and they felt they didn't know enough; the teacher knew more. The teacher was trying to elicit responses from them and then they always felt inadequate. So when it comes to them needing to teach it they sometimes feel inadequate themselves and sometimes do that very strange thing that happens in the teaching profession; they sometimes behave in exactly the same way their teachers behaved towards them. So that's one response. Another is that there are people who have discovered poetry for children and adore it and delight in it and revel in it and find it all like a wonderful humiliation-free zone because it's not like the A Level and degree level stuff they did. There's also a very small group of people, and sadly it is quite small, for whom poetry means a lot at all levels. In other words they write it, they read poetry for adults and then they do poetry with kids and they can see these different fields as being separate but at the same time helping each other. So probably I'd characterize it in that way.

Interviewer: You mentioned teachers who as young people had a negative experience of poetry in school. Do you think these teachers

inherited their attitude toward poetry from their own teachers? Do they end up conveying this attitude to their students?

Rosen: Yes! I think there is that element because there is so little poetry teaching in teacher training, there's so little of it that it's very hard for them to break out of the cycle. So sometimes because I get involved it does involve a break in the cycle because they see that there are other ways that you can do poetry from the ones they did at school. Because where else could they go? The stuff that comes from government and the stuff that came from their own childhood may well be woefully inadequate and woefully just plain wrong.

Interviewer: You regularly conduct poetry readings and poetry writing workshops in schools. Do you feel that you have an impact on teachers' attitudes towards poetry by means of such events?

Rosen: Yes, I can only say I hope so. What I hope that I'm doing when I'm performing is showing them first of all that performing poetry is something that you can just stand there and do. It's another form of storytelling. You have these mostly short texts and you can stand there and present it and do it. Then in my writing workshops I try to show them that everybody's got a voice, everybody can talk, everybody can make the kind of notes that I show children how to make in order to have some words on the page in relation to a topic or a subject or a theme or a style of poetry. You can play with the notes on the page and I try to show the teachers this isn't just following a formula but it's a way of playing with words and phrases and cadences and repetitions; it's endlessly flexible. That's what I try to show them, even in the short space of time that I have in the couple of hours I spend in a school.

Interviewer: But how successful are such events in terms of their impact on teachers' attitudes towards poetry and on the way they actually teach poetry?

Rosen: If you're referring to INSET (in-service training for teachers) days and so on well that's a bit sad actually. I think I did more of those in the past than I do now. I mean I co-run a yearlong poetry course at the Centre for Literacy in Primary Education and it's quite successful in the sense that we get a bit of momentum over the year. They come in, we do workshops, the teachers present the work the children have done and so on. So it's that nice sort of loop that can happen when teachers investigate their own practice, try something out and bring it back to the seminar and share it. I think that has a sort of deeper and more profound effect than the sort of one-off one-hour poetry workshop. I mean in my experience

one hour isn't really enough. It just feels a little bit incidental whereas my argument about poetry is that it's a major plank in the way in which children can express themselves emotionally, linguistically, and socially. When handled well teachers can find it to be a tremendous ally in what they're trying to do with the children. The children like it, they become motivated, they read, they write, they perform. This is after all what you're trying all the time to help children do: find a voice, find a way of writing, enjoy writing, enjoy reading. Poetry is a tremendous ally in that. Even though I'm always quite happy to do it, if I just do a one-hour workshop I always get the sense that I haven't necessarily convinced the teachers of what I've just said to you.

Interviewer: So do you see it almost as an act of persuasion on your part, trying to persuade teachers that poetry is their ally?

Rosen: In the present context it does involve persuasion because the way poetry has been dealt with over the past period consists of doing a poetry unit. Even the very phrase "poetry unit" suggests something vaguely military or dutiful or obligatory and the teachers enter it with a slightly heavy heart. Some of them, not all of them, but some of them do. You can see that they have this sense of "Oh well, maybe what we do are just various formulae. We do acrostics or we do Kit Wright's lovely poem 'The Magic Box' and we just go and write. That works. And then maybe we do that Michael Rosen poem 'Down Behind the Dustbin' or something. Oh well, we've got rid of that and now we can get back to the real stuff." Of course I completely challenge that and I have the sense that poetry is part of the real stuff, whatever the real stuff is. One of the jobs we do is try to make reading writers and writing readers. Poetry is a great ally and not this dutiful little slot that happens late in the term once you've got through what is supposed to be the core curriculum or something. I just utterly reject that but it's very hard to make that point in the space of a one-hour twilight INSET.

Interviewer: Do you feel that this is coming from above or do the teachers themselves feel that poetry shouldn't have a place in the curriculum?

Rosen: Well, it's essentially coming from above and that's because for better or for worse poetry doesn't feature in the Key Stage 2 SATs and so the teachers don't feel that it's necessary. They don't necessarily feel that there's a connection with helping their children get these marks they're supposed to get in the SATs. So poetry is this sort of strange kind of neither here

nor there, neither fish nor fowl. It's neither the thing that will help them succeed nor is it this great something you do when you've done the boring stuff and then you rush off and go on a trip round to Wembley Stadium or something. It's neither one nor the other; it's just a sort of strange place. This all comes from the way in which education has been constructed from above. Very very little education in the last era—I would say for the last 15 years—has actually been created from below by teachers observing what children like and don't like, what works and doesn't work. So I think it's a consequence, yes.

Interviewer: So would you say that there is kind of resignation on teacher's part, that they've given up almost since they haven't been involved in the process?

Rosen: Only some. I'm not going to generalize too much. I think for some teachers, particularly if they had unfortunate experiences of poetry at school. Where and how are they going to break out of that particular cycle? Well, if they had unfortunate experiences of poetry or if it was done in a very mechanical way and they do realize themselves. This is one experience I've had. Teachers said, "I didn't really like the way they did it when I was at school. I want to do something different but I don't know what different, how different." So they feel uneasy about the way they were taught maybe twenty, thirty years ago but want to do something new and different but they don't know how to. These are honest responses but it does sometime mean that some teachers arrive at that poetry unit with a sense of foreboding.

Interviewer: A number of studies underscore the importance of the idea that teachers of poetry should position themselves as readers of poetry in order for them to influence students' knowledge and attitudes. How often do you encounter teachers who position themselves in this way?

Rosen: Reading it for themselves, you mean? On the Tube or at home and so on?

Interviewer: Yes, teachers who enjoy reading poetry and position themselves in class as readers not just as teachers of poetry.

Rosen: I don't suppose I encounter it a lot. I'll be absolutely honest. No, I don't think I encounter it a lot. I'd get a better look if I put a bit of a timeline on this. My parents were educators and great fans of poetry and read a lot of poetry themselves and so encouraged their staff when they were heads of department to read poems for themselves. "Look, here's a new poet. His name's Ted Hughes. He's writing poems. Why don't you read them? You should take it into the classroom." That was



my parents' attitude and that was the attitude of the London Association for the Teaching of English, which they were both heavily involved with. As well as the Institute of Education. I can remember teachers coming to our home and being like that. But I think that the training of teachers and the whole teaching profession has been encouraged to look at teaching as a kind of mending cars type job rather than an act of humanistics. That's not the teachers' fault. That's how it's being done. Teaching has become something technical. We have this notion of how to manage a classroom. Not how to interest children but how to manage a classroom. So a lot of work has gone into the idea that teaching is made up of these technical things that you do and that children are these strange unmanageable chunks of rather lively plasticine that you have to keep shaping and molding and preventing from smashing the windows or something, and there are techniques of doing it. My parents came from a different tradition, which was that the more humane and humanistic you were, in other words the wider your range of interests then the more you'd be able to engage the children. Now that notion has faded. I won't say it's disappeared but it has faded and of course poetry was one of the ways they did that. Poetry was one of the ways in which you could engage with children in that humanistic way.

Interviewer: You meet many teachers and I imagine you're friends with many others. Do you feel that teachers read poetry?

Rosen: Not many.

Interviewer: Why don't they?

Rosen: I think for the reason I just gave. Teaching is too often treated as this technical job so that even the teaching of reading now is just a matter of getting the letters and the sounds taught. Then the reading enjoyment will take care of itself once we've done the technical stuff. Students have to decode as if it were a science. It's not a business of letting the children experiment for themselves but you have to show them the process of experimentation, of collecting data, and only then can they start doing their experiments. So at every step teaching is being made into this technical thing. It's very hard for a teacher out there on their own to break that mold and say, "No, I don't think teaching is this purely technical thing. It's about how I as a human being relate to these other human beings." In that context it's easy for poetry to be heard because poetry is very useful as a way of being humane and of interacting with people in a very humane way. It's very useful for that. But as I've said, we don't live in that cultural context.

Interviewer: From your experience, what proportion of the teaching profession actually goes beyond exam preparation when teaching poetry?

Rosen: In relation to poetry I'll be absolutely honest, not many. In relation to fiction, probably quite a few. I think teachers are much more confident with fiction, much more confident doing role plays or hot seating, mini dramas, getting the children to guess what comes next, writing sequels or prequels to what they're reading, writing from the point of view of characters. Teachers tend to be much more confident in those kinds of activities in relation to fiction than they are with poetry. I think it's because of their long history of mild humiliations as students studying poetry. But in actual fact most of those things that you can do with prose you can also do with poems. So I would say to those teachers, "Do it with the poems. Take the person who's saying 'I wandered lonely as a cloud' and freeze frame him and freeze frame the daffodil. What's the daffodil thinking about that man who is wandering about?" When you say this to teachers you can see a sort of weight lifted off their backs and they say, "Oh yes, of course. I can just take it across." I should also say that as a consequence of a variety of old things poetry in this country has developed a kind of holiness or sanctimoniousness around it. People sort of lower their voice and regard it as if it's some sort of special thing that you only get out on Sundays. It's a peculiar thing. I suppose it came from the Romantic poets who elevated what they were doing into this semi-sacred role of the imagination and so on. To be fair to them, Wordsworth in the Preface to the *Lyrical Ballads* said that we must write in the language that people understand. But at the same time they did give it a certain sacred or sacral quality and it's been very hard to move away from that in spite of the enormous work of the American poets and people like Roger McGough and Adrian Mitchell in this country. It is special but it's not sacred. We think it can do lovely, funny, magical things but only in the same way as music. It's like that. It's not that we have to bow down and treat it as if it's something that deserves some very special respect.

Interviewer: Is it only teachers who look at it as something sacred, as something special?

Rosen: No, that comes from much wider in society. There is a sort of tone of voice that sometimes, not always but sometimes, surrounds poetry. It's almost as if you have to be a very special person to read it, a very special person to read it out loud,

a very special person to be able to understand it, and there's only a very special high refined voice in which you can deliver it. You get wonderful people like Ian McMillan who has a very strong local dialect, a local way of speaking from South Yorkshire, and it's great. He's on Radio 3, which used to be a kind of holy of holies and somebody like him has done enormous work in desanctifying it. But at the same time it persists. I would never blame teachers for that. It's part of a wider issue about the role of the intelligentsia in this country, the particular position it holds.

Interviewer: Does this kind of attitude harm poetry?

Rosen: It's not that it harms it but it's only one of its voices. So yes of course there's a sacred voice, of course there's the voice of T.S. Eliot when he says, "I grow old, I grow old, I shall wear the bottoms of my trousers rolled." It sounds like he's this sort of person who's intoning this strange lonely chant. That's wonderful. I love it dearly but it is only one voice. There's also the voice of rap music, there's also the voice of the shaman, the voice of comic poet Spike Milligan. Poetry is many voices. It's just that there has been a slight problem—probably coming via the intelligentsia through university courses and reaching teachers—that somehow or other the sacred voice is the most important or even the only proper voice that poetry should have. But it's a great mistake. You can have comic poetry just as in a Gilbert and Sullivan opera or choral voices where you can use multi-voices and single voices. It can be in any dialect. It can be in any language. It can be short or long and all that. So I would say it must be many voices and not just sacred.

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